

NAVIGATING THE FALKLANDS

By Richard H. Wagner

The Falklands War of 1982 involved the most intense naval action since the Second World War. Key to the war was transporting an army, its supplies and equipment some 8,000 miles by sea and landing it on enemy-held islands that were far beyond the effective range of any friendly land-based aircraft. To accomplish this task, Great Britain assembled an armada made up of not only Royal Navy ships but also merchant marine ships operated primarily by their civilian crews. Trevor Lane, today the Staff Captain of QUEEN MARY 2, was the navigator on the most pivotal civilian ship SS CANBERRA.

The Ship

CANBERRA was the first large ocean liner built in the United Kingdom after World War II. Work was started on her in September 1957 at the Harland & Wolff yards in Belfast, Northern Ireland. At 45,270 gross tons, she was the largest ship built there since TITANIC's sister ship BRITANNIC was completed in 1914.

"The ship was really way ahead of its time when it was designed in 1956 and launched in 1961." The superstructure was primarily made of aluminum, which reduced weight and as a result, fuel consumption. Her engines were located aft, creating more passenger space. It was found, however, during her sea trials, that because of the engines aft, the bow rose out of the water at speed and so ballast was added to the bow area. This took care of the problem but left CANBERRA with a deep 36 foot draft.

"You could get up to 21 or 22 knots. She was a turbo-electric steamship - - you burn heavy oil to produce heat to heat up water for the boilers to push the steam through a turbine to generate electricity to turn a motor to turn the propeller. They had these huge boilers and these huge boiler rooms and this huge network of engine room staff. They had to stand there for four hours at a time by the boiler. Very labor intensive."

CANBERRA was very well-received when she entered service. She was a symbol of Britain's re-

emergence after the devastation of the Second World War. In addition, she had been built in order to take emigrants from Britain to Australia, which was a very popular move in those days.

By the 1970s, however, emigration from Britain to Australia was declining and what there was of it was being captured by the airlines. Consequently, P&O Lines, CANBERRA's owner, looked for something new to do with the ship. The line settled on basing the ship in New York for cruises down to the Caribbean. This proved to be an unqualified disaster and P&O announced that because of poor bookings, CANBERRA would be scrapped in 1973.

Almost immediately after that announcement, bookings began to increase. However, they were not from the American market but from Britain. Accordingly, P&O shifted the ship to Southampton, England where she did various cruises during the warmer months. Then, for three months each year, the ship would do a world cruise.

This proved to be a very popular schedule. CANBERRA had been built as a two class ocean liner. Although the separate classes were eliminated when she became a cruise ship, the passengers, reflecting Britain's social class system, created a de facto separation. "There was the pub end and the cocktail bar end. People liked having that option."

The Conflict

The Falkland Islands are the only large island group in the South Atlantic. Located approximately 300 miles east of the Straits of Magellan, they are cold, damp and windswept. With no known natural resources or industry, the island's small population is engaged primarily in raising sheep. In short, it is a place located far from anywhere with little economic value.

Nonetheless, Britain and Argentina have been quarreling over these islands since the early Nineteenth Century. There are conflicting claims that run back to 1592. However, in modern times, Argentina's claim is

based upon their relative geographic proximity to Argentina while Britain's best argument is that the island's population is of British descent and desires to remain part of Britain. Attempts to resolve this dispute diplomatically, including talks held under United Nations auspices, have failed.

In the Spring of 1982, the dispute erupted into violence, not on the Falklands themselves but on a glacier-covered island some 800 miles further out in the South Atlantic. A group of Argentinean civilians landed on South Georgia ostensibly to collect scrap from an abandoned whaling station. However, they raised the Argentinean flag and refused to recognize the authority of the island's British administrator, an employee of the British Antarctic Survey, which provided the island's only inhabitants. In response to a cry for help, the governor of the Falklands sent 22 Royal Marines to South Georgia. Argentina countered with 100 Marines, a frigate and an ice breaker. A fire fight ensued, which despite initial British success, ended with the Royal Marines surrender.

Emboldened by this victory, the military junta that ruled Argentina dispatched an amphibious invasion force to the Falklands. On 2 April 1982, 800 Argentinean Marines landed and confronted 80 Royal Marine defenders. In the first engagement, the British prevailed. However, inasmuch as the Argentineans were landing more men and armor, the governor entered into negotiations that resulted in the governor and the Royal Marines being deported from the island. The Royal Marines, however, promised to return.

To the celebrating Argentineans, this must have sounded like a hollow threat. Britain's days of empire were over and surely the British would not fight for some islands with little strategic or economic value located 8,000 miles from home. Furthermore, even if they wanted to fight, how would they transport an army to the war zone? There were no friendly air ports in which to fly troops. Moreover, the Royal Navy was in no position to mount an amphibious invasion. Based upon the prevailing Cold War assumption that the next war would be fought against the Soviets in Europe, the Royal Navy had been transformed from a power projection navy to a force charged with helping to keep the North Atlantic from being closed by Soviet attack submarines.

But, there were important principles at stake. First, the people of the Falklands wanted to be British, not Argentinean. Thus, the principle of self-determination was involved. Second, in Moscow, the leaders of the Soviet Union were watching to see how Britain, and by extension her closest ally The United States, reacted to this provocation. If the West simply capitulated, the

Soviets would feel that they too could get away with similar acts. Thus, while attempting to negotiate, the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher prepared to send a force south.

Key to this risky strategy was requisitioning ships from Britain's merchant marine. Tankers, container ships, tugs, freighters and even North Sea ferries were "taken up from trade." However, in order to transport the troops themselves, Britain would need its two large passenger ships QUEEN ELIZABETH 2 (*See The Log*, Fall 2005 at p. 10) and CANBERRA.

A Call To Serve

Trevor Lane was helping to paint his neighbor's house when the news came over the radio that Argentina had occupied the Falklands. He had been with P&O for eight years and had risen to navigator on CANBERRA. He was now home on leave while the ship completed her annual world cruise. "I almost instinctively knew that that was going to affect me."

Lane knew that in times of war, the government had authority to requisition merchant ships and had seen Royal Navy personnel coming on board CANBERRA from time-to-time for inspections and to see how the ship operated. Thus, it was apparent that CANBERRA was part of the Royal Navy's contingency planning.

Although the navigator who was on CANBERRA at the moment was senior to Lane, Lane had been with CANBERRA since he had been a cadet. "I was part of the establishment, if you like, on the CANBERRA." Furthermore, his colleague was just completing a lengthy world cruise. If Lane did not relieve him, his friend would have to continue on with the ship. Moreover, the town in which Lane lived along the south coast of England was known as "P&O Village" because so many P&O officers and employees lived there. It would have been difficult to show his face at the local pub, if he did not volunteer. Thus, when the personnel department called, Lane agreed to go.

"Military personnel joined the ship in Gibraltar and they were already making plans aboard the ship. When they got to Southampton and discharged the passengers, an amazing refit that took place, which implied that they had plans in place to convert the ship very quickly. They cut off large parts of it and built three helicopter decks in three days. They took things like cocktail bars in the forward end of the ship and put scaffolding jacks throughout the bar [to act as pillars to support the weight.] Then they extended the deck above it and took down all the rails and that became the main helicopter deck. They took one of the main swimming pools in the middle of the ship and put huge girders in the

middle, covered that and cut down the side rails. They had another helicopter deck up by the funnels. They did this fantastic conversion in three or four days."

Although CANBERRA normally carried 1,700 passengers on a cruise, "they embarked a whole brigade - - nearly 4,000 troops. It was called Three Commando Brigade, and it was made up of paratroopers, marines and some naval auxiliary staff and some RAF and helicopter pilots."

The ship set out from England with the ship's P&O captain and a Royal Navy officer sharing command. Lane was not a member of the Royal Navy Reserve and thus technically, he was only under the command of the civilian captain. However, the navy wanted direct authority over the ship's navigator. P&O did not want to cede full authority. "They ended up giving me Royal Navy stripes on one shoulder and regular merchant navy stripes on the other. That was the compromise."

The military had placed additional communications equipment in the ship's chartroom. As a result, members of the press were constantly walking in to send stories home. Therefore, in order to maintain secrecy about the ship's movements, a chart table was constructed in Lane's cabin and for part of the voyage, an armed guard was posted outside.

"We were doing submarine avoidance practice and similar things on the way down. They ripped up the carpet and glued them on the windows [to prevent light from showing at night]. . The ship also had to be fitted out for refueling [at sea]. The whole of the top deck was filled with munitions. There were gun emplacements around the ship right from the start. Blowpipe missiles and everything else. Because of the helicopters, CANBERRA was obviously a prominent target."

"Almost immediately, the troops had to start being trained. So, they had gun practice on the deck. [There was also] lots of physical exercise on the outside deck. CANBERRA had a Promenade Deck that you could run around. The troops used that to train to keep themselves fit in full gear, with full pack on. The Promenade Deck had a composite cement on top of the steel, it was like rubber so it would flex. After a week of a couple of thousand troops storming around there in hobnail boots, it became a beach - - pretty sandy. with The carpets ripped up and the decks destroyed, it changed the ship very quickly."

Into The War Zone

After refueling in Sierra Leone, CANBERRA sailed to Ascension Island where the invasion force was forming. Upon sailing, the ship came entirely under military control. However, Lane's role

grew rather than diminished. "I went with the senior naval officer everywhere to all of the different planning meetings to see how we were going to get the ship into these places. This planning took a lot of time flying around in helicopters and a lot of meetings. Many decisions had to be taken that were completely contrary to what I had been trained up to that point."

As the task force moved south toward the Falklands, the military made full use of CANBERRA's facilities. "CANBERRA had two restaurants. The first class restaurant was kept open for the officers. You had regular service and the food was better than you would normally have [and there was] wine. The other restaurant was used for everybody else. They got all their meals on pressed trays. But, there were no complaints about the food. Different bars became pubs for different levels. Where we were fortunate was that we had a full military band onboard. It could play anything from a full march to pop or disco things. [In addition to entertainment by the band], they had beer night, quiz night, tugs of war and different games on decks between the different divisions. They were trying to maintain pretty high morale."

"I can remember having a [formal] dinner. I had dinner with quite a few senior officers that were going to be involved in the landings, some of whom didn't come back."

The British plan for re-taking the Falklands envisioned that there would be an initial assault by the troops traveling in CANBERRA and then at a subsequent point, these troops would be reinforced by the troops traveling in QE2. Thus, the entire strategy was dependent upon these two ocean liners.

"Somebody realized as we were approaching the Falklands, that now we were within range of enemy aircraft. With 4,000 troops onboard had the ship been hit, that [would have been] the end of the game. So, they decided in the middle of the South Atlantic that we were going to transfer half these troops to other ships. Fortunately, we managed to get a day when that was possible to do it. We transferred many of the troops over to different landing craft. [However, the landing craft could only carry the troops for a short time] because they didn't have the accommodations."

With the task force no in the war zone, there was "a lot of navigation without radar. Of course, there were no lights either. So, you have got to occasionally flick it on to get a position and turn it off again. You couldn't manage with it totally off. You just wanted to not have it on long enough so that somebody could actually track it."

The Falklands consist of two large islands separated by a channel. The Argentineans expected that the

British would land near Port Stanley, the islands' main settlement located on the eastern side of East Falkland Island. Accordingly, they had deployed the majority of their 10,000 man force in that vicinity.

The British had no intention of making a frontal assault against a numerically superior enemy in fortified positions. Therefore, the plan was to land the troops on the western side of East Falkland and then approach Port Stanley overland from behind. However, to do this the invasion force would have to enter the channel between the two islands and remain in confined waters while the landings took place.

To reduce the task force's vulnerability to air attacks, the planners looked for a fjord-like landing area - - a narrow inlet with steep mountains on either side. Such a place would afford the Argentine pilots relatively little time to pick their targets and drop their bombs. However, "that meant anchoring the CANBERRA in a situation where if the stern had swung around, it would have hit the beach. If you hit the stern on the beach and damaged the propellers, you would be there forever. So, you were totally dependent on the wind and, of course, that was completely contrary to anything the captain of the ship would have ever been used to. The idea was, if necessary, we would get a warship to push the stern [to prevent it from swinging]."

The Landing

In the darkness of 21 May, CANBERRA, the landing ships, ships carrying tanks and other equipment and their Royal Navy escorts entered the channel and then sailed into an inlet called San Carlos Water. The escorts bombarded Fanning Head, a hill overlooking San Carlos Water, which was known to be occupied by Argentinean troops.

While the bombardment was going on, CANBERRA anchored and lowered its lifeboats to put the troops ashore in the same manner it would have landed vacationers during a call on a Caribbean island. "We put 4,000 troops ashore. None of them were injured getting to the beach. Quite a lot of them were injured subsequently but they all made it to the beach."

The South Atlantic winter was rapidly closing in on the Falklands and the weather had been mostly gray and stormy since the task force had arrived in the war zone. However, on 21 May, the day dawned clear and beautiful. It was perfect flying weather.

Plans called for installing a surface-to-air missile battery on the top of Fanning Head. Once the area was taken, the Army brought Blowpipe missiles to the top of the hill. However, the planners had failed to consider that some time would be needed to calibrate the

missiles. As a result, the ships were on their own.

"You have to picture a fjord and you are looking out the bridge window, and around this head came a solitary aircraft. As soon as it came around, the warships that were shielding us attacked it and shot it down. So, I thought 'That's good, if they carry on like that we will be fine.'"

"About an hour later, eight or nine enemy aircraft came in for attack. I guess that is the first time I realized 'now we are in trouble. Here we are, stuck here in the middle of these rocks, there is nowhere to go and these guys are trying to kill you.' They were flying very, very low and you could actually see the pilots. If they came in low and fast, the Sea Wolf missiles and [other anti-aircraft defenses] could not get them."

However, "they hadn't primed their bombs properly [for] flying low like that. The bomb had to drop a certain distance before the bomb would actually explode. So, many of them were not actually detonating. They were putting holes in ships but not actually going off. Others, however, were actually going off. HMS ARDEN, for example, was very close to us and I saw it hit numerous times in the stern. She sank soon afterwards. All her survivors came to us."

"Another ship was the ANTRIM. It was hit and the bomb didn't go off. But, then they sent a team to take the charge out of the bomb and it went off while they were attempting to defuse it."

"The air attack went on all day. On the bridge, the senior naval officer would watch the aircraft coming in and would broadcast over the ship: 'Take cover, take cover, take cover.' The planes would come in and there would be a lot of loud banging. We would run from standing out on the bridge wings keeping a lookout to trying to lay down on the deck to take some kind of cover. All around the ship, there were masses of tracers and everything else these guys had."

"By this stage, troops that were being hurt on the shore were coming to us. It was the first time I had seen a triage. The doctors were standing there as these poor kids were coming off the helicopters - - This guy goes this way, this guy goes that way, this guy has got a chance. One of the main ballrooms was being used as the main operating theater. Other parts were also used for surgery so they had nets hanging between where the different surgeons were operating. And that was all there was, just curtains. There were not [operating] rooms in the usual sense."

"The Argentineans could not fly at night. So, that night once it became dark, we took the ship out to safe water out of enemy aircraft range. We thanked our lucky stars that we had survived."

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However, this did not end CANBERRA's time under fire. After landing her troops, CANBERRA was summoned to rendezvous with QE2 at South Georgia, which was once again in British hands. Early in the conflict, a British submarine had sunk the Argentinean cruiser BELGRANO, which was the pride of the Argentinean Navy. Argentina had threatened to get revenge by sinking the most famous British ship, the QE2, and had leased long range aircraft to seek her. The large and not very maneuverable ship would be particularly vulnerable in the confined waters surrounding the Falklands. Therefore, it was decided to transfer the troops that had been brought south on QE2 over to CANBERRA. In exchange, the wounded and the survivors of the ships that had been sunk would go to QE2. Accordingly, the exchange was made using the two ships' boats in an icy bay.

This meant that CANBERRA would have to enter San Carlos Water again. "That wasn't pleasant because having survived it once, you didn't feel like going back in there again - - risking your life again. By that time, it was known as Bomb Alley."

Once again, CANBERRA managed to land her troops without incident. However, the large container ship ATLANTIC CONVEYOR, located about half a mile from CANBERRA was not so lucky. "An Exocet seeks out the largest target. There was not much difference in size between the CANBERRA and the ATLANTIC CONVEYOR. The ATLANTIC CONVEYOR sank pretty quickly with helicopters, Harrier jets, tanks and equipment onboard. It was a big loss."

"Having landed all the troops, we were sent off into a holding area between the Falklands and South Georgia, out of enemy aircraft range. Every so often ships would come by and drop off casualties but for a long time we were just going around in a big box of water."

Meanwhile, the troops that had been landed by CANBERRA were proceeding across East Falkland Island and after some fierce engagements, the Argentinean troops laid down their arms.

Although the islands had been liberated, the Argentinean junta on the mainland refused to acknowledge that the war was over. This left the British with a serious problem. They now had thousands of prisoners and no practical means of taking care of them for an extended time. Accordingly, it was decided to attempt to return them to Argentina. "We were tasked to take them back to Argentina while the war was still on, which again shows you how pathetic the whole thing was. We were playing a sort of chess game over here in the Falklands and meanwhile we are going to take some of

the players back to their homeland. We loaded them all up, put them in nice cabins, gave them showers, fed them and everything else."

"As we were approaching [the mainland], an Argentinean warship came out to escort us - - and we are still at war. They escorted us into the harbor. They put a curfew on the town. No one was allowed to see [the disembarkation] and then they discharged all the prisoners. Then, the question was whether they were going to let us out, which they did. It was all a matter of honor." After returning to the Falklands to re-embark some of the British troops, CANBERRA sailed for home.

"When we went ashore [on the Falklands] there were just piles of ammunition, just stacks and stacks of it, just like bonfires made of guns. You could take whatever you wanted. You could pick up a magnum here, something else there. We all had these mementos. As we are coming up the English Channel, the Deputy Captain made an announcement that British Customs are quite aware that you have picked up mementos and you might be taken to prison if you are found coming ashore with weapons. It would be a very serious offense. Soon all down the side of the ship there were guns being tossed over."

"We came home to a fantastic reception. We had about three and a half thousand men on board. The [Southampton] docks were totally open to the public and there were masses and masses. It was a lovely summers day and there were boats all over the place, tugs with flowers. Prince Charles flew onto the ship and so I met Prince Charles."

"As we were approaching the docks, we suddenly realized that the ship had such a list to it caused by all the men looking for their wives and girlfriends that [the ship would collide with the cranes that lined the docks]. So, they had to order these men to get back on the other side. Of course, nobody was too keen to go to the other side because their wives and girlfriends are down there. So, the guns came out. The poor guys had gone through all this and now the military police orders them back to the other side of the ship or else."

"Once we got home, there were street parties, all kinds of celebrations. Once you've been home, reality sets in about what you have done and seen. Then, the reaction is quite bad for awhile. You would have a lightning storm and you would be pulling mattresses over you on the floor. It makes you wonder even now, quite how much that affected all of us. It was very quick, very intense. It wasn't long and drawn out. There was a lot of carnage in a short time on both sides."

"It was very intense, very grey, not too many highpoints, really. Having said that, it is one of those things you are glad to have been on for the experience and even more glad to have come back."